

Tube Corn

Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

Cyberzone doesn't work.

Look, when was the last time you were in one of those shops that has a bank of computer games set up for the punters to try before they buy? You elbow your way to the front of the crowd of little boys relentlessly racking up the points and what do you do? Either you elbow one of the little darlings out of the way and grab the controls for yourself or else you watch for a couple of seconds and then drift off to look at what's new in the video section. Because computer games – watch my lips – computer games are not a spectator sport.

No, I don't care that I'm writing this in January after only two episodes of *Cyberzone* have been broadcast and that you'll be reading it in March after the series is over. No, I wouldn't even care if in the meantime it became a cult classic; it wouldn't make any difference to the argument. I'm still right: the concept doesn't work.

The concept is that two teams of players can meet in "virtual reality" and have a contest which the rest of us can share in via our television screens. We can't.

Now "virtual reality" is such a sexy idea these days that everyone wants to have a go at it, even though what's really on offer is nothing like the cyberpunk models we're all waiting for them to build. In particular, the square child's-building-block spaces that can be created in the game are nothing like the detailed, better-than-life spaces of fictional "virtual reality." Watch the way that in *Cyberzone* floors acquire pattern, doors acquire detail, only as the "borg" approaches them...

How does it operate? Teams of two (celebs vs special interests – for example the footballers John Barnes and John Fashanu vs two members of The Dangerous Sports Club – play against each other in a computer landscape. Each team has a "borg," a computer-generated figure, which is operated by the team's "runner" advised by the other member, the "guide." The runner moves the borg by running on a treadmill and turning a wheel to determine speed and direction respectively. The guide has an overall map of the game, so can advise on direction and on the whereabouts of the other team who are in pursuit in a "virtual vehicle." In various locations there are games to be

played – using two controls to move obstacles and fire weapons to get, for example, a mouse to jump a simple course, or the borg through a maze, or an obstruction out of the way of a target.

The overall effect, however, is *The Crystal Maze* on a Game Boy with an audience of neanderthals.

The first problem is that the "borg" isn't viable as a viewpoint character. We are interested in the celebs and their reactions to the frustrations of the game but we can't watch them and the game itself at the same time. But the borg is a featureless construct (it has to be coloured in to let you know which team it represents) with no visual interest at all. We are more involved in the computer-generated landscape when the camera moves through it as the borg's viewpoint, when effectively we "become" the borg, but we can't stick with that viewpoint either without losing track of where in the game we are. We need to see (1) the celeb trying to play the game, (2) the overall picture of the game screen held by the runner, and (3) the borg's-eye view of the cyberzone simultaneously, and a fussy little TV screen is too small to let you have a split screen that would give you all that information at once.

(Incidentally, I assume "borg" stands for "cyborg" as in "cyberzone." No doubt the producers aren't science-fiction readers and so don't care about fussy distinctions between cyborgs and androids and computer constructs.)

Secondly, and the reason the series suffers so much in comparison with *The Crystal Maze*, the game itself looks to be no fun to play. The chase element doesn't take off and the puzzle-solving is both too simple and too difficult. Simple, because the puzzle element is almost non-existent – even if the contestant is too stupid to realize you have to move the two bars so that the gaps in each line up with the target, Craig Charles is on hand to give the game away almost at once so that the pace doesn't slacken. The skill element in solving the puzzle is not in comprehension but execution – having deduced what you have to do it seems to be extraordinarily difficult to carry it out. So for the spectator, whereas in *The Crystal Maze* your natural tendency is to shout advice to the screen as you can clearly see what they have

to do to succeed, in *Cyberzone* your natural tendency is to thump something impatiently because you want to get your hands on the controls and shift the thing yourself since this fumble-fingered moron can't seem to tell the difference between the red and green buttons. Instead of willing them to succeed you will them to get out of your way and let you have a go.

The third barrier to the success of the programme is the testosterone. No, go on, bear with me for a moment and think about it; I'm not just being girly here. Craig Charles brings to the programme Lister's lads-in-space persona from *Red Dwarf* as well as a catch phrase – *awooga!* – which sounds like the mating call of a hundred brain-dead hooligans, particularly when pitched down in the diaphragm, accompanied by that circular arm-waving motion Julia Roberts does in the racing scene in *Pretty Woman*, and produced by a studio audience apparently selected entirely from the ranks of the recently lobotomized. The word even gets its own press release:

"Craig Charles reckons that after 10 years in the business it is time he had a catch phrase, and his unique computer game show *Cyberzone* seems sure to create a new household word... What does it mean? 'I don't really know' says the Cyber-Gamehost 'It just makes you feel good to say it loud.'"

This gameshow twilight zone is strictly for duds: Craig Charles orchestrates it, James Grout (Inspector Morse's boss) is the computer "Thesp," and I suppose we should be grateful they forgot to include a token babe to keep score.

Still, in a world where the "Game Boy" can advertise itself in *Cosmopolitan* under the headline "Here's how to make life more exciting for the man in yours: buy him a Game Boy" and not be besieged by rampaging feminists I suppose *Cyberzone* will be as big a hit. All it needs is a slogan. How about "stand by your man... while he watches *Cyberzone*?" Because "here's how to make life more exciting for the woman in yours: buy her a Game Girl" just doesn't work, does it? After all, in popular parlance a man who is "game" is a good sport, ready for adventure. A woman who is "game" is a slut. ●

"Shut up!"

With that blade pressing into my throat, I didn't try to struggle, I just tried to keep him talking, until somebody noticed I was missing. "Come on, Victor," I said. "We're old friends, aren't we?" He spat in my face; I didn't dare raise a hand to wipe it off. I grimaced and fought back a wave of nausea as I felt the spit oozing down my cheek.

"Friends?" he said. "After what you did to me?"

"What do you mean? I never did anything to you."

"What about Atlanta?"

"Atlanta? What are you talking about? We never even played Atlanta!"

"You recorded a virtual there. Monarch Studios, Atlanta. I remember the date: April 23rd, sixteen months exactly tomorrow. I was outside the studio, waiting for you with a bouquet of roses. I always used to send you roses, remember? Roses for Rosie? And these five guys came up to me... I remember there were five of them. Five of them! And they grabbed the roses from me and they threw me up against the wall, and they told me, 'This is from Rosie,' and they took turns punching me in the stomach and they knocked me to the ground and they kicked me and they told me if I ever came near you again, they'd kill me. I had four broken ribs; I spent a week in the hospital. I gave you my devotion, you gave me two black eyes and four broken ribs."

"I had nothing to do with it, I swear. I never even knew about it until now. I wouldn't have done that to you or anyone. Honest."

"You didn't know about it, huh? I looked up and saw Derek watching from a window. You think I don't know about you and Derek?"

I remembered now. Victor wrote me this crazy letter, he said he'd been to a ceremony just like the one in *Satan's Child*, the devil had promised me to him for eternity, and he'd be coming to get me. I showed the letter to Derek and he said not to worry, he'd make sure the guy never got near me. I didn't get any more letters, so I forgot about it. It was a case of out of sight, out of mind. How was I supposed to know what had happened to him? Derek and I split up, I left the band, and I'd never given Victor a second thought. It was like he'd never existed. "I'm sorry, Victor. But it was nothing to do with me. I didn't know about it."

He didn't hear what I said, he didn't seem to be listening. His eyes moved to the blade at my throat. "Things would have been different if I'd had this. I'd a shown 'em not to mess with me. Nobody messes with me."

"In your first ever virtual, you looked straight into my eyes and told me you loved me. I played it over and over, and each time you promised to be mine forever. I laid there in the hospital for seven days and seven nights and you never came to see me once. You never even sent me a card. Why'd you say you loved me if you didn't mean it?"

"Victor, those were only the words to a pop song! Words someone else wrote for me to say. And I didn't know you were in the hospital. I honestly never knew. Now please put the knife away."

"That's when I started to hate you, Rosie. That's when I really started to hate you. I wanted to kill you."

Victor was the booth slasher. The reason all the victims looked like me was because in Victor's mind,

